United Nations A/55/630–S/2000/1101

General Assembly
Security Council

Distr.: General
17 November 2000

Original: English

General Assembly
Fifty-fifth session
Agenda items 114 (a) and (d)

Security Council
Fifty-fifth year

Human rights questions: implementation of human rights instruments

Human rights questions: comprehensive implementation of and follow-up to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

Letter dated 17 November 2000 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit a statement issued today by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea in response to Ethiopia's false allegations of the existence of "hidden concentration camps" in Eritrea (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 114 (a) and (d), and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Tesfa Alem **Seyoum**
Chargé d'affaires a.i.

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Annex to the letter dated 17 November 2000 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Press release

Ethiopia: fictional allegations as a backdoor to the peace process?

Early this week, the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry circulated a statement alleging the existence of "hidden concentration camps" and widespread abuse of the human rights of Ethiopians in Eritrea. In what is becoming a mendacious pattern, the authorities in Addis Ababa have gone so far as to produce fabricated lists and "testimonies" of Ethiopians victimized by this phantom campaign. What are the real facts?

In the first place, there are no "concentration or slave labour camps" in Eritrea as is alleged by Ethiopia's smear campaign. This has been ascertained by several intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and numerous representatives of governments, including Ambassador Bogosian, the special envoy of the United States Secretary of State to the Horn of Africa, who visited Ethiopia and Eritrea for the second time as late as last week, are among the independent bodies who have attested to this.

As far as the 3,000 or so Ethiopians stranded in two places (Ala and Afabet) are concerned, they are there because they were displaced or affected by Ethiopia's war of invasion. ICRC is involved in ensuring their safe repatriation, which has been obstructed in the past by Ethiopia's reluctance to receive its own nationals. The largely voluntary repatriation of Ethiopians was interrupted in July owing to Ethiopia's refusal to accept the access routes. Ethiopia's claims of some "30,000" Ethiopians incarcerated in over "70 concentration camps" is thus a sinister lie advanced to justify some ulterior motive.

Secondly, the Government of Eritrea has placed itself on record, through official communications to ICRC and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners, both civilian and military, by both sides with the assistance of ICRC. Progress on this matter remains blocked by Ethiopia's refusal to accept these basic tenets as provided for by the 18 June Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities (S/2000/601) and the Geneva Conventions. Only last week, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, when requested by ICRC to release Eritrean civilians incarcerated in the notorious Dediesa concentration camp for the last two and a half years, responded that his Government was only "ready to re-examine with flexibility the status of those detainees at Dediesa in line with progress in the peace process".

Indeed, Ethiopia's established record in its treatment of Eritrean civilians since the outbreak of the conflict is beyond the pale:

- Under an official policy, the authorities in Addis Ababa have, in turn, robbed, incarcerated and then deported over 75,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean heritage;
- Ethiopia detained, for up to one year, Eritrean university students on an exchange programme at Addis Ababa University. In contrast, Ethiopian

students studying in Eritrea in June 1998 were allowed to sit for their exams and then flown back to Addis Ababa;

- As stated above, about 1,500 young Eritrean civilians remain incarcerated in the brutal Dediesa prison camp and thousands more are unaccounted for. Last month the death of yet another young Eritrean in Dediesa, where many have perished under the harsh conditions, highlighted the horrendous situation those detainees face.

Moreover, Ethiopia continues to commit gross violations of international law in the occupied territories, as the following reports illustrate:

- Agence France Press and the South African Press Association on 27 June 2000 reported that "several Eritrean civilians were burned alive in their homes during looting by Ethiopian soldiers before they retreated from Guluj in the South-west of the country";

- The spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in a press briefing note on 3 October similarly reported that "the town of Om Hajer was 50 per cent destroyed with virtually all public buildings trashed. The hospital and the school were partly destroyed while churches and mosques were looted of all the icons". In all these places, "everything of any value was taken away";

- More recently, human rights groups in Eritrea have documented countless cases of torture, rape and looting by Ethiopian forces in occupied Eritrea.

It is perfectly clear that it is Ethiopia and not Eritrea which stands accused of grave violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The Government of Ethiopia is engaged in this deception with the aim of covering up its crimes. Moreover, as the Government of Eritrea had underlined in its communications of 29 August, Ethiopia's smear campaign is motivated by:

(a) Its unwillingness to receive its own nationals;

(b) Its desire to create a sense of tension so as to delay or obstruct the deployment of the United Nations peacekeeping missions;

(c) Its desire to create a "humanitarian pretext" for resorting to war.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Asmara
17 November 2000